



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

13TH ASSEMBLY

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

Public Hearing Transcript

COVID-19 and Territory Finances

Thursday 28 May 2020

Litchfield Room

Members:

Mrs Kate Worden MLA, Chair, Member for Sanderson
Mrs Lia Finocchiaro MLA, Member for Spillett (substituting for Mr Higgins)
Mrs Robyn Lambley MLA, Member for Araluen (substituting for Mr Mills)
Mr Gerry Wood MLA, Member for Nelson
Mr Tony Sievers MLA, Member for Brennan
Mr Lawrence Costa MLA, Member for Arafura (via videoconference)

Witnesses:

Hon Michael Gunner MLA, Chief Minister
Hon Nicole Manison MLA, Deputy Chief Minister and Treasurer
Hon Natasha Fyles MLA, Minister for Health
Mr Jamie Chalker APM, Commissioner for Police and Chief Executive Officer, Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services
Ms Jodie Ryan, Chief Executive Officer, Department of the Chief Minister
Professor Catherine Stoddart, Chief Executive, Department of Health
Dr Hugh Heggie, Chief Health Officer, Department of Health
Mr Shaun Drabsch, Chief Executive Officer, Department of Trade, Business and Innovation
Ms Catherine White, Senior Executive Director, Business and Workforce, Department of Trade Business and Innovation
Mr Craig Graham, Under Treasurer, Department of Treasury and Finance

The committee convened at 2 pm.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

PUBLIC HEARING ON COVID-19 AND TERRITORY FINANCES

Madam CHAIR: Good afternoon everyone. As Chair of the committee, I formally declare open this second public hearing of the Security and Emergency Management Subcommittee of Cabinet on the Territory's COVID-19 response and Territory finances.

I welcome the Chief Minister, the Deputy Chief Minister, the Minister for Health, Ms Ryan, the Police Commissioner, Professor Stoddart, Mr Drabsch, Mr Graham, Dr Heggie and all other contributors today.

I acknowledge that we gather this afternoon on the land of the Larrakia people and we pay our sincere respects to elders past, present and emerging.

We will proceed in a similar manner to the last hearing in line with the agenda agreed and circulated by the committee.

Chief Minister, before we proceed to questions, would you like to make a brief opening statement today?

Mr GUNNER: Madam Chair, a few quick things before we take questions. First, on saving lives, our secure borders continue to be the best defence against Coronavirus; Dr Heggie can talk more about that today. This morning I gave an update on our border arrangements. We remain the safest place in Australia.

Next week we will start stage 3 of our roadmap to the new normal with all businesses open; we are the first in the nation. Then we can move to a new phase. From Monday 15 June, we will move 'mandatory monitored quarantine' to 'mandatory self-quarantine with testing'. Domestic arrivals from interstate will be able to choose their own quarantine arrangement, as long as it is appropriate within the guidelines directed by the Chief Health Officer. Arrivals will not have to stay at accommodation selected and secured by the NT Government and the \$2500 quarantine fee will no longer apply. Basically, Territorians can quarantine at home; visitors can quarantine in a hotel.

Arrivals will be tested for COVID-19 on the first three days of their quarantine and tested again in the last three days.

Police and environmental health officers will be spot-checking at random points throughout their quarantine. We are doing this first and foremost to help Territorians who want to come home, where it is safest. They have not been able to under the existing quarantine arrangements. We can do it because we have been so successful in crushing Coronavirus. It is an important step towards eventually easing our border restrictions once it is safe to do so.

You all know what we have done in regard to saving jobs. We have thrown the kitchen sink at protecting as many jobs as possible with the Jobs Rescue and Recovery Package and the Small Business Survival Fund, slashing payroll and halving Power and Water bills for businesses. Saving jobs costs money and right now everything else comes second to saving jobs.

We are working through and prioritising the savings that some agencies are making as a result of COVID-19 to help cover the costs of saving jobs and reprioritising other government funding towards this, too.

For example, we originally budgeted \$30m for the Home Improvement Scheme but it will be a lot bigger, helping more businesses and saving more jobs. We put \$20m from the Local Jobs Fund towards covering the cost of the Home Improvement Scheme. The Local Jobs Fund is there to protect and create local jobs, which is exactly what the Home Improvement Scheme is doing.

We have also reprioritised \$27m from the urban public housing stimulus program and \$30m from the capital works cash pool. Because of our success in crushing the Coronavirus and the success throughout Australia, we are more confident of our financial position than we were a month ago.

Some things have not changed. The federal government's budget is still delayed until October. We still do not have certainty of 70% of our revenue sources, including the GST. However, as I said on Monday, we believe we can be in a position to provide some budget forecasts in the coming months before the election and Treasury is beginning to look into that. I stress this work will take time and it is still full of uncertainty. The

forecast will be rough but we will have qualifications. They will be the best that Treasury can do with all the information it has.

Our commitment has always been to provide Territorians with what we know when we know it. On 29 July, before the caretaker period begins, it is our intention to provide a Coronavirus financial report setting out what we have done to save lives and jobs, how much it has cost and the most reliable budget forecast for that financial year.

I do not apologise for doing everything possible to protect Territory jobs. I would rather the government take a hit right now than a business hit the wall or a worker hit the dole queue. Of course, it will be up to the opposition parties to explain their alternatives. If they do not like what we have done to save jobs, I invite them say how much they will cut and what jobs they would have sacrificed.

Madam CHAIR: Are there any questions on the opening statement?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Yes, I do. Chief Minister, can you confirm that the riot at the prison will cost taxpayers \$40m?

Madam CHAIR: This is on the opening statement.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Okay. You will not answer that?

Madam CHAIR: I rule that question out of order ...

Mr GUNNER: Are there any questions on the opening statement?

Madam CHAIR: You might like to come to that later.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: That is fine. You mentioned borders, Chief Minister. When will it be safe? What measures or metrics will indicate to you that it is safe to open the borders?

Mr GUNNER: I will ask Dr Heggie to join us. I might invite Natasha, as Health Minister and Catherine as well. This is how I describe it and there is a more scientific explanation from Dr Heggie, which is what people might want to hear. They have heard me describe it before.

I am looking at the community transmission rate down south, the containment measures and new cases. Essentially, we are getting to the point where we want to know that we have reduced, as much as possible, the risk of Coronavirus coming into the Northern Territory. Obviously, we have bought a lot of time to prepare. Dr Heggie has a lot more degrees than I do when it comes to medicine and can describe, better than I can, the epidemiological links and how that is the main thing we are looking at.

Dr HEGGIE: We have understood that our borders—Australian and the NT border—are the strength that has prevented the Coronavirus coming to our shores, causing harm and lives lost.

The decisions by the expert panel, of which I am the Northern Territory representative, considered all of the things that led up to the closures and the consequences if we did not put things in place. Now that we are actually adjusting the controls we have to look at the current evidence. That is where we are talking about the evidence of what the virus is, what it does and how it spreads, as well as the epidemiology. That means the cases which occur around Australia.

It has come to us that the biggest risk is overseas travellers; that remains the case. Travel from some jurisdictions to other jurisdictions and the NT needs to be considered on the basis of the cases that occur in those jurisdictions and where in those jurisdictions they occur. We have not had any local cases, outbreaks or community transmission. That is where it is spread from amongst the community where it is not identified as a contact with groups such as overseas travellers. It is important to understand that this is dynamic.

We are looking at the current evidence and the small numbers in other places around Australia and using the science of replication, and the replication rate that a virus will actually infect somebody and then be transmitted to another person. That is the reason for the AHPPC decision to have a staged, or phased, approach to reducing or adjusting the controls.

The consequence is that in other jurisdictions they are looking at two replication periods. That is up to 28 days. Because we have not had any community transmission cases here, we have the opportunity to

allow Territorians to return to a more normal way life—you could say, ‘the new normal’—where we still have to practise the principles I outlined here previously.

The decision about the border opening really needs to be considered because it is our strength. If community transmissions occur here we now have a number of things in place. We have preparedness through adequate testing, remote response plans, adequate ICU capability and the reagents and PPE available if we were to have cases here.

I think that the decision needs to be a very considered one, taking all of that into account.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Dr Heggie, is there not some sort of matrix of things you are looking through? You mentioned community transmission, replication rate, the number of cases et cetera. Is it the Territory’s expectation that we will not be in a position to reopen our borders unless COVID is virtually extinct in the rest of our country? At what point will we accept a risk or not accept a risk? I think Territorians do not really know what we are working towards. Is it zero everywhere and then we are opening? If you could just talk through that a bit more.

Mr GUNNER: I will take it then pass it to Dr Heggie. I think the Health minister would like to answer that as well.

We are working on a flexible trigger rather than a hard trigger. We have seen experiences in the Territory before that if you relied on a hard trigger we would not be opening up right now due to the extra cases that came in with the ADF from overseas, which were explainable. The bit you cannot put in a matrix would be the containment measures down south. For example, the ability for Victoria and New South Wales, mainly, to be able to control an outbreak. We have seen outbreaks before in other places. Tassie did an amazing effort down there with its outbreak, but still had a lot of people in quarantine as a result.

We are looking not just at the epidemiology and community transmission, we are also looking at the method in which a government can lock it down and avoid the risk of seeding, which is obviously the danger of it coming into the NT. We have a risk of Coronavirus entering right now even with our hard borders, we just reduced the risk right down. Every time we take a step on the pathway to the new normal, we increase the risk and put more responsibility onto Territorians. That is why we are doing it in a gradual and considered way. We made our changes today. It is part of that gradual considered way.

Eventually, we will open our borders. When you do that, no matter what you do, the risk will increase. It is not zero down south and it cannot be 28 days eradication down south. It cannot be a vaccine. We have looked at all of those as potential triggers. As the rest of the country is on its path to crushing Coronavirus like we have, I do not think a vaccine is a reasonable trigger now. I would love to see a vaccine, but we are more looking at reduced risk down south.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You mentioned having a lack of confidence in other jurisdictions to contain outbreaks. Is that correct?

Mr GUNNER: That is not how I worded it. I will get Dr Heggie to answer.

Dr HEGGIE: Thank you for the question, because it is really important to understand this. We have not had any cases here. Other jurisdictions have had, in part, suppression. The outbreaks that have occurred have been very small and localised to particular suburbs. It is not that you would wait until there were no cases in the other jurisdictions; it is about how they manage the outbreak in terms of testing and tracing, using a variety of tools. We have that in place, so if that were to occur here, we have the same capability.

The domestic borders are a vulnerability but our international borders are far more. We have seen this in the last couple of days, with people coming from overseas.

The answer is not that we would wait until there were no cases. It is how we altogether manage them.

Mr GUNNER: To reassure the Leader of the Opposition—I do not want her to misunderstand me because this is not a shot at Dan and Gladys as the two main jurisdictions. It is not a lack of confidence in their measures but it is the fact that they are stepping through stage 1 into stage 2 then stage 3. They are somewhere between stage 1 and stage 2. And, as Premier Berejiklian said, as they step out of that, they expect second waves will spike. We have not seen that yet and we have confidence in them. However, they have warned that as something happening, so we need to see what happens and how they contain it so that we have confidence.

For me, it is about confidence going forward and how they manage their steps. We have a road map to the new normal for the country, which was agreed to by every premier. It was recommended to us by Dr Brendan Murphy, the Chief Medical Officer. On that, it clearly states that interstate arrivals—border controls, essentially—will be the last step of stage 3.

For the country, we are still in stages 1 and 2. Even on the recommendation from the Chief Medical Officer—which does not have a date to it—you would not be doing it yet. You have to see how the rest of Australia handles their steps to the new normal. That is what the Trade minister was saying the other day. You must have confidence in how they handle stepping out, too.

That is what we are looking for, how they handle their road map.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Will you be giving sufficient notice to business and tourism about the border opening, recognising that they need time to be able gear up or make tough decisions about hibernating their business?

Mr GUNNER: I confirmed today 30 days' notice, or roughly a month depending on the day we do it. You would take into account weekends.

Ms FYLES: It is really important for the committee to understand, Madam Chair, this is something that does not have a cure or a vaccine. We see America, a country with a usually well-recognised hospital system, has had 100 000 deaths and over five million cases. We have taken some huge steps forward. In the Northern Territory, we are able to eat a meal in a cafe. We are able to go to the gym; you cannot go to the gym in other states.

With the June 5 changes we will see in the Territory, opening our businesses up fully, we have seen a strong response from Territorians and businesses. They have worked hard. They have put in place measures that are sometimes tricky and difficult. They want to do that to keep Territorians safe.

We need to watch what is happening across the borders. Yesterday, we saw the tragic death in Queensland of a 30-year-old. A case was diagnosed in South Australia yesterday; that was their first case in 19 days. We must not become complacent. I do not think any of us expected that, this far into the pandemic and in this short period of time—we have not had a locally diagnosed Territory case in seven weeks and have no active cases. All of that can be gone with just one case, so we have to remain vigilant. We know the impact that it has on the community.

We have been meeting regularly with the Chief Health Officer and listening to the clinical advice. We will continue to listen to public health advice and the Chief Health Officer when making these decisions. Territorians recognise this and thank us for it. They know they are difficult decisions but they are being kept safe.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Earlier in the week on breakfast television—it may have been Monday—the Deputy Chief Health Officer said that there were no health reasons that Australia borders should be kept closed. Did you hear that?

Mr GUNNER: I will add a clarification. In bringing into place our border closures, I briefed National Cabinet three times on the work we were doing. I discussed it with the Chief Medical Officer, Brendan Murphy, on each occasion. We did not seek permission from National Cabinet about the decision, but I made sure they were fully informed. I thank the Australian Government for securing our borders with us. We have ADF and AFP personnel on the border helping us enforce the decision.

The government's border decision has been played up a bit. The Australian Government is helping us put this in place and I am very grateful for it. Dr Heggie has been in many conversations nationally through AHPPC about this issue with Brendan and Paul.

Dr HEGGIE: I believe that the phrase he used was, 'there is no medical advice' and that it is up to each jurisdiction how they manage this. We are all in different stages of the virus and its suppression. The jurisdictions that did well are worried about places where there are cases. That was a statement at a point in time and here we are, a week later, and we have new cases in different parts of the country, including regional Queensland. The decisions made depend on what stage we are at.

He was making a statement from himself. I have to say that he takes part in the AHPPC meetings, which is a collection of public health physicians and the Chief Medical Officers. It is a very considered group making

decisions based on the evidence available. Even two days ago there was a change that needed to be considered. I respect his statement, but it comes down to each jurisdiction and their management of the risk.

Mr GUNNER: We also have medical advice from AMSANT and ACCHS where they advised us to do something similar about borders.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Is it likely that our borders will be reopened jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction on a case-by-case basis?

Mr GUNNER: I cannot speak for other state leaders. My most likely estimate is yes, based on their general and National Cabinet commentary. There are also a few examples of different premiers on the record about that. We outlined our method about making a decision, but I am not sure if others have. We will review it weekly from June 15 with grounds for making a decision. I am not sure if others did the same. I also recognise that in outlining that, we are ahead of the roadmap for the country, which we have been for every other measure.

The roadmap for the country says not to do it until all states go through stage 3. At the moment no state has gone through stage 3. We have to see how they handle stages 1 and 2. Even at stage 3 down south—and this is probably the concern, I would suggest, about how they handle second waves or second spikes. At stage 3 they are looking at caps within venues of 100. We do not have that here in the Territory. We are a very free place. We do not have those caps; we have the health principles.

Even at stage 3 down south, they are looking at significant restrictions on what they do and they are still worried about whether that would lead to a second wave or second spike. That is what we are worried about, too. We do not want them to experience it. As soon as we have confidence they will not go through a second wave or second spike, we can start making decisions.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Why does it need to be 30 days' notice? You will undertake a weekly assessment from 15 June and then you will give 30 days' notice. Is it for a health reason or a practical reason to allow business and industry to gear up?

Mr GUNNER: We have given notice all the way through; it works better when you give notice. When we were shutting down there was often insufficient notice, in my opinion. Those decisions were being made on a lot of evidence, but quickly. I am not criticising that process but we did not give much notice. On the way out we will be giving much more notice, particularly for when people put in place their COVID-19 safe plans.

Tourism, hospitality et cetera have indicated that 60 to 90 days' notice would be preferred in terms of gearing up. Whether that is from a marketing sense or getting hotels, they would like more time. From the moment we get the evidence to say that we should look at opening up the borders, 60 to 90 days would be cruel. It would mean closing the borders for longer than we need to. I do not want to do that.

Thirty days is a legitimate amount of time to allow them to prepare but also be reasonable from when we made the decision. I would not be keeping borders shut longer than I need to. That is why 30 days is reasonable. I respect that they asked for 60 or 90, but that would lead to a cruel outcome of keeping borders shut longer than we need to.

Commissioner CHALKER: Just to value-add to the Chief Minister's statement about the borders with other jurisdictions, the constitution is in play. That creates some limitations about preferring access from one jurisdiction over another. The premise is all Australians being able to move freely and you cannot differentiate or distinguish between relevant jurisdictions. It then comes down to specific reasons and the powers for the CHO to determine hotspots and the like. We are looking at those things from a legal point of view, as well.

Ms FYLES: In terms of the reopening, in the Territory we are in a privileged position where we have reopened activities; people can go to the gym and participate in training for sport. The work that sporting clubs, individuals and businesses have put into that has been huge. They have balanced the health professionals', clinical and public health advice in changing the way they operate their business to accommodate Coronavirus.

As we see the 5 June restrictions stepping in, there is more risk. It is not just a matter of saying, 'Great, it is all good, open your businesses'. There has to be considered thought. Without a cure or a vaccine for this virus and because in some cases it is so mild that an individual does not know they are carrying it—we have seen it can have a devastating impact on other people.

We need to be able to test. We have increased our testing capabilities and rolled that out Territory-wide. We will continue to do that, but we also need to be able to trace. We know it will be more devastating to business to go on-off, on-off. We need strong public health principles in place to allow our community to adjust to the new normal. We understand the frustration for people, but it is so important to save lives—literally.

Mr GUNNER: Even when we move to what you might describe as opening the borders, it would not necessarily be—we are doing the work now on how to plan for this. We may still need to have checkpoints in place at the borders. It would not necessarily mean the police leaving the border. We may still need to have some understanding of who is crossing at that border point. We are working through what we might ask them at that point in time. It will obviously be a significant easing, but would not necessarily mean no one at the borders. We are working through the detail of that. That is something the Territory Controller is already working on. It is an important thing for people to be mindful of.

Mr SIEVERS: You were talking about testing and exemptions. How many tests have we done? Can we get that figure? How will we ensure that, under the new exemptions, people will follow through on that?

Ms FYLES: We have conducted more than 7500 tests. We conducted more than 800 tests last week and have regularly tested more than 800 individuals. Anyone with a respiratory-type illness is tested. We have also broadened the scope to frontline workers, including teachers, police officers, nurses and Corrections officers.

Regarding the surveillance and sentinel testing—Dr Heggie can provide explanation of the point of that. As we see measures ease and people mixing, everyone is trying their hardest to keep 1.5 metres away from one other. Because the symptoms are so mild, people might not realise they are ill and could be passing it on, so the testing is particularly important.

We often talk about police officers—I acknowledge those officers on the borders—doctors and nurses, but our laboratories and public health team have done a phenomenal job throughout this. They will continue to do so because that testing will be the key for a long time to come. We also acknowledge the Commonwealth with the point-of-care testing, which is being rolled out across remote communities. That is all pieces to the puzzle. There is no rule book or manual for us to follow on Coronavirus, but testing is a really important part as we step into further stages.

Madam CHAIR: We will move on to agenda item two, which is Education—I note the acting Education minister is not here. I am happy to take questions ...

Mr GUNNER: On the notes you have—schools and childcare, safety for teachers and carers, and physical distancing. The Education minister and CEO are not here, but the Health CEO and Chief Health Officer are as well-placed as anyone to answer any of those questions.

Madam CHAIR: Does anyone have questions on this?

Mr SIEVERS: With regard to schools and education, how are we ensuring that our kids, teachers and support staff are safe?

Mr GUNNER: I will make one comment before I pass over to Dr Stoddart. This week, Premier Berejiklian had to shut a couple of schools. She is against the policy that they have taken. She does not want Coronavirus in schools, so it is a tough decision. But she described that as part of New South Wales' new normal—shutting the schools, the cleaning protocols and the resumption of school.

I do not want that to be our new normal in the Territory, and we have made a significant effort for it not to be our new normal. I will pass to Dr Stoddart to talk specifically about what we are doing within school grounds, but when I read that comment, I found it quite stark that other states consider that the new normal. It is not ours and I do not want it to be.

Professor STODDART: We are keen to keep children in their schools. It is fundamentally important not to disrupt their education. From a health perspective, in regard to Coronavirus, the number of children who have the virus is very low internationally.

We have worked with the Education department and some of the private and independent schools to make sure the standard principles that have been outlined through the Chief Health Officer have continued. That includes children who are sick, or parents who are concerned about their children being sick with any kind of sniffle, not being at school; parents not going in to the school grounds and leaving their kids at the edge of

the playground, so there is no interaction that is not required; and asking schools to do things like cleaning playground equipment after sessions of play.

It is incredibly hard to keep children away from each other for a long period of time, but generally the movement of play is less than 15 minutes, anyway, so we can manage that in some areas. We are working with schools on a range of strategies that emerge over time. People come up with creative ways in order to meet the social distancing requirements.

Ms FYLES: Further to that, the schools have broken down—children are in a class group of 25 or so children, but assemblies have been individually held in the classroom or online; children are not drinking out of the bubblers, they are filling up their water bottle; and there is lots of handwashing and hygiene. The principles we have in our broader community have been implemented in the schools. Schools have done a wonderful job and we need to thank them.

The government has provided support to childcare for the extra cleaning; there is a grants program open. It is the same concepts and principles, health wise, they are being implemented into our schools and childcares.

Dr HEGGIE: This really important because the evidence we have literally received in the last couple of days is that children do not seem to catch the virus very much at all. It may be that they do not have the number of receptors that the Coronavirus interacts with in causing the illness. That is really just in the last few days—international studies.

It is possible that some of them might and may have minimal illness. Yes, there is the risk of teachers potentially being infected. So if you maintained all of the principles in terms of the 1.5 metres and trying to reduce an interaction by posturing not directly at the person. Standing behind would be safer, less than 15 minutes, not too many interactions, scrupulous hand hygiene before eating and the cleaning protocols and, very importantly, that students or teachers should not come to school if they are unwell.

Mr GUNNER: You asked what we are doing to keep the schools safe under Coronavirus. We are currently doing some work on what we take out of the Coronavirus response that needs to be a permanent part of how we do business. One of the most interesting things out of our school environment at the moment—and we have asked for this to be collected as hard data as, at the moment, it is soft data—is that our schools have never been healthier. Our children's population has never been healthier. Our childcare population has never been healthier.

Obviously we have put in place a lot of measures that are good—full stop—when it comes to how people might get sick. We can take that on as ongoing practice. I think that is quite important. We have learned from how we modified ourselves to handle Coronavirus that will be permanent ongoing business to do.

Mr SIEVERS: Regarding home schooling, are our schools getting back to normal? Are there any numbers on most schools back to the new normal?

Mr GUNNER: I apologise. I thought we could take all the questions without the education Minister and the CEO here. I do not have those hard numbers in front of me.

Ms FYLES: School attendance is back to pre-Coronavirus levels. More to the Chief Minister's point, the soft data is anecdotal at the moment, but our schools appear a lot healthier and attendance has been good, so we will certainly look at the lessons we have learned and continue to support our teachers.

Schools were very accommodating in terms of teachers who fell into the higher risk categories of age and underlying illnesses. They were able to work with those teachers to ensure they had a role to play within the school that potentially protected their health, particularly in the beginning. Likewise for families that had children who were potentially more vulnerable than others. But I think with the four days off school—all the kids wanted to go back.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: We need to move to a normal position; it is important for everyone's health to do that, particularly for our kids. Given that we do not have community transmission and all of the other things we talked about and that a lot of the restrictions are being eased, why is it that schools have to complete a 19-page form to go on a school excursion within Darwin or Alice Springs? A simple excursion to the museum, for example, from a Palmerston school requires a 19-page form.

Mr GUNNER: I am happy to take that on board and work with the Department of Education and the Department of Health.

Madam CHAIR: Perhaps we could take it on notice to find out if that is the case. I might do that.

Question on Notice No 1.1

Madam CHAIR: Member for Spillett, could you restate that question for the record please?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Please provide justification for why schools should be completing a 19-page form to undertake local school excursions off campus.

Madam CHAIR: Who will be taking that question on notice, the Health minister or the Chief Minister?

Mr GUNNER: I will take it and later we can sort out who will answer.

Madam CHAIR: Chief Minister, do you accept that question?

Mr GUNNER: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: That being accepted, the question by the Member for Spillett to the Chief Minister has been allocated the number 1.1.

Madam CHAIR: Mr Gerry Wood, the Member for Nelson, will be joining us any moment now. When he does I will indulge him for a moment and allow him to come back and ask a question on Education if he has one, but probably not the opening statement.

Member for Spillett, do you have any questions on business support?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I do. Chief Minister, can you outline the government's overall expenditure on support for business that was allocated? It would be good to know the overall amount committed and spent to date and then broken down into the various schemes.

Mr GUNNER: The majority of that would fall under Shaun Drabsch, the CEO of the Department of Trade, Business and Innovation.

Mr DRABSCH: A total of \$125m has been distributed, with \$100m for the Home Improvement Scheme, \$20m for Business Improvement Grants, \$5m for the Immediate Work Grants. Also \$50m has been allocated for the Small Business Survival Fund.

For the Small Business Survival Fund, we have already approved grants of \$24m spent across the immediate survival payment, the operational boost and operational support. There were 1694 applications. We have approved 1012 and there are some more that were processed last night. There were 270 withdrawn or declined.

For the Home Improvement Scheme, we have granted \$10 425 000 with 2466 applications assessed or under assessment and 1889 approved, which resulted in the issuance of 2016 vouchers. For the Business Improvement Grants, we have so far allocated grant funding of \$1 095 000. Of the 1423 applications received, 364 are assessed or are under assessment and 85 of those were approved. There were 97 vouchers issued. For the Immediate Work Grants, \$2 194 000 have been allocated to date. There were 101 applications received and we have assessed 97, approved 38 and issued 42 vouchers.

Of those three programs, we allocated 2155 vouchers, \$13.6m of grants were distributed and there will be additional funds from the \$2000 greater contribution depending on the scheme. The total value of works is about \$18m so far. When combining the \$13m of grants and \$24m under the survival fund, we have granted \$37.6 of cash into small businesses around the Territory.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Thank you. Going back to the Home Improvement Scheme, did you say 1489 have been approved? Then you said 2016 vouchers approved.

Mr DRABSCH: That is right. An application can have two jobs in it, so one successful application could result in two vouchers.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: It is 1489 households, effectively?

Mr DRABSCH: Yes.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Over a number of more vouchers. How many staff has the department allocated to processing all this? It is very well known and documented that the approvals, particularly for home improvement, are going slowly. That is no reflection on the people who are working hard to do it, it is clearly a resourcing issue. How many staff are working on these approvals?

Mr GUNNER: I will pass to Mr Drabsch in a second. Obviously, the priority in the first few weeks was the Small Business Survival Fund. We have seen a lot of staff transfer across to the Home Improvement Scheme. Essentially, the numbers have doubled in the last seven days as a result of that. We are seeing the numbers in the HIS accelerate quite significantly. I thank the public servants involved in doing that work for helping small businesses survive and now moving on to the Home Improvement Scheme and getting that out the door more rapidly.

Mr DRABSCH: Member for Spillett, just a correction—the approvals under the Home Improvement Scheme are 1889.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Oh, okay, 1889 for households.

Mr DRABSCH: In the number of staff, we have a grants team established in the department, which has operated the Biz Secure Home Renovation Scheme and other grants programs over the recent years. There were 13 in that team originally. From the standing start on 27 March, we have grown from 13 staff to 74 as of today, with another four staff about to join the team. That is the original 13, some 27 seconded staff from across my department, another 28 staff seconded from other Northern Territory Government agencies. We are just in the process of administering an expression of interest for staff to stay on for the duration of the programs as we continue to assess the applications over the coming months.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: When is it anticipated that all of the vouchers will be processed?

Mr DRABSCH: We are well advanced with the Immediate Works Grants. The Business Improvement Grant Scheme process will be completed over the coming weeks into June. With the Home Improvement Scheme, we are aiming at a target rate of 1000 applications assessed per week and we are currently running at a daily rate which meets that target.

It has taken some time to ramp up the process, but we have had to train staff to make sure the processes are properly applied. I am pleased with the rate of completion that the team is accomplishing.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: So, only 1000 ...

Madam CHAIR: It is on the same topic? I want to give some others some questions on the same, if they have them.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Yes, that is fine. If we have less than 2000 approved and—what?—over 20 000 applications?

Mr GUNNER: I will clarify there. The more important number to look at is the work rate, which is up around 2450. What is the work rate, Shaun?

Mr DRABSCH: It is 2466 assessed.

Mr GUNNER: Yes. That is the work rate of the public service on this. Then there is what has been approved in households and vouchers out the door. Then there is what has been withdrawn or declined and then there is what is out now—out for more work. Unfortunately, there is an element of forms not filled out correctly. We are working with people who have done those forms to make sure they do not miss out.

For me, we should measure the work rate of the public service there. They have done more than the 1889. They are up around the 2500 mark. I wanted to make sure we gave the public service the right credit there.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I am trying to estimate how long—is it 18 more weeks, 15 more weeks? At 1000 applications a week, if we still have ...

Mr GUNNER: Maybe it is also important to remember that the design of the scheme was, deliberately, upfront \$30m over six months. Then it grew out to \$100m over 12 months, with all those vouchers out in under six months, so that we had work flowing through the Territory during the extent to which we thought Coronavirus would hit, then the extent to which we thought the low Wet Season also would be an issue.

They will be doing it at around 1000 a week. They will get those grants out and get businesses working. They will make people happy with their households. Most importantly, they are creating jobs. The scheme is meant to see that money flow over a period. It would do damage to the economy if it all flew out at once.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: It was originally a stimulus and, as we know, many businesses are seriously struggling ...

Mr GUNNER: It was \$30m over six months—a stimulus for a long period of time, and now it is \$100m over 12 months, so it is a lengthy stimulus.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: We are aware of that. But as an unintended consequence of what has happened, and whether that is the roll-out of the scheme or your change to the scheme overnight—businesses are seriously hurting because of it. We know very well that a lot of Territorians held onto work they were planning to get done in order to benefit from the scheme.

The scheme has been very popular; it is only processing so many applications—2000 applications have been approved in five weeks. It has significantly held up work. Tradespeople are desperate to get some clarity on when jobs might flow. They cannot see any rhyme or reason to the manner in which the department ...

Mr GUNNER: It is 1000 a week. We have answered that question already.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I have not asked my question yet.

Madam CHAIR: Put the question, please.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I am getting to it. How is the work being distributed? Businesses are very concerned that—for example, say they did 70 quotes and are not sure when they will come through, when or if they will be approved at all. If someone has 20 quotes approved close to the end of the 12-month period, they might not be able to complete that work. It does not give them the opportunity to plan for staffing or products. What is the government doing to support those businesses that are really struggling as a result of implementation of the scheme.

Mr GUNNER: We were asked this last time; I am happy to say it again. We are aware that there are jobs across the Northern Territory. We do not want this program to be administratively bogged down. I have asked the department to make sure we can allocate the grants across the centres—Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine, Darwin, Nhulunbuy et cetera—at an even rate. While it is first come, first served, we do not want to see a lump come out in Katherine and none in Alice Springs. I have asked for even distribution across the four regional centres, which can be done without slowing down the allocation rate.

We have also asked for businesses—where it is possible—to have a job, which is a reasonable question. The CEO has offered businesses—if businesses want to know how many of their quotes were used and lodged in an application, they should know that. Not every business knows how many of their quotes were used in that grant, which is helpful. Then they know what jobs they are up for.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: That information is not being provided, because businesses have asked for it. It is not available. Businesses have told me they have rung up and asked and have not been given that information.

Mr GUNNER: Let us correct the record—it is available ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: That information is 100% available? If a tradie rings the department of Business they will be told how many quotes made it into their system?

Mr GUNNER: If I could answer the question.

Madam CHAIR: The Chief Minister is answering that question and you are talking over the top, if you could stop, please.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I am clarifying the question.

Mr GUNNER: It may be helpful for the person who has the answer to be allowed to provide the answer, rather than someone who does not have the answer, guessing the answer.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Chief Minister, please be clear.

Mr GUNNER: As I just said, that information is available to businesses. The CEO is more than prepared to take the phone calls and give businesses the answers. The CEO has made that commitment; the information is available to businesses if they want to know how many of their quotes are attached to an application form so that they have that knowledge.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Who do they contact? Just to confirm—where do people go to get that information?

Mr GUNNER: Member for Spillett, you asked a question; we are very patiently answering that question ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I am just making sure, for all the people listening, where they go for that information.

Mr GUNNER: You are preventing the ability for the person who has that information to actually answer the question. Let the question be answered.

Mr DRABSCH: We have indicated, when businesses have asked—over the last couple of days, in fact—for this information. I was asked on Katie Woolf's show the other day—I undertook to explore whether that information could be released. I am happy to release the total number of quotes attached to applications, but for privacy reasons I cannot give the details of who accepted and who did not. I have communicated that back to Mix 104.9. All they have to do is contact our workstations at homeimprovement@nt.gov.au or phone our contact number, 1800 193 111 and the people in the Territory Business Centres can direct them to the people administering the program. They can provide that information.

In terms of the staff working on them, I have sought to emphasise at various the points the amount of work that these people are undertaking. They have not just worked their 8 am to 4.21 pm. They have, in combination, worked an additional 1471 hours including on Saturdays, over Easter and late nights.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I have absolutely no doubt. They are very busy.

Mr DRABSCH: Each of them, on average, have worked approximately an extra three-and-a-half days of work.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you Mr Drabsch. The Member for Nelson now has questions on this area.

Mr WOOD: Thank you, Madam Chair. I apologise for the casual outfit.

Mr GUNNER: It is the most casual I have seen you at parliament.

Mr WOOD: I am always casual. I have a question on the business stimulus package. The complaint I have heard is that you have restricted businesses that work from home. For instance, not only do people in the rural area work—perhaps you will get a bookkeeper working from home, there are nurseries that operate the business from their property and people like mango farmers obviously live on the property. They have been told that the business stimulus package is not for them. Is there a reason they have been left out of the stimulus package?

Mr DRABSCH: Are you talking about the business concessions?

Mr WOOD: The \$10 000 one. There are too many packages—the latest one, which where the business pays \$10 000 and the government puts in \$10 000. A number of people have said that they were told that they will not get that benefit. It appears that your work has to be separate from your residence. That is unfair, from my point of view.

Mr GUNNER: My understanding is that it depends on the application they are putting in. We have had a few complaints to our office where they were prepared to concede that they were essentially improving their living residence and that was not the purpose of the grant. You have to be applying to improve your business. It is obviously in the Ts and Cs.

Mr DRABSCH: I introduce Cathy White, who is the Senior Executive Director of Business and Workforce and oversees the administration of the grants programs.

Ms WHITE: With the Business Improvement Grant, it was for improvement of business premises. We had a lot of sole traders and contractors who took advantage of the Home Improvement Scheme to do works in their own place. We found that from a sole trader point of view, as someone who works from home, yesterday we contacted 877 businesses that were eligible for the Small Business Survival Fund and got some money there. They were contacted with a link to the rebound support grant form, which gives them an opportunity to do some business improvement to their premises.

We had challenges, because we could not be everything to all people for every single grant. The Business Improvement Grants they were over-subscribed very quickly, as well. With Immediate Work Grants, we had more people want money than was there. We have been looking at how we can make sure it is as equitably spread as we possibly can. In this instance—those 877 businesses—many of them were disappointed to miss out on the Business Improvement Grant, now have an opportunity to do some of that work.

Mr WOOD: I want to know why there was a decision that did not allow a mango farmer, who perhaps wanted to put a new toilet and shower in their packing shed or a nursery that wanted to upgrade some of their facilities—it looked discriminatory from a rural perspective. People who work on their property were being discriminated against simply because that was the only place they had their work.

Mr GUNNER: That fund was over-subscribed. If a government looks at a version of that at a different time perhaps we can fix that in the terms and conditions. Obviously the money has been fully expended now. There is opportunity through the adaptation grants that Ms White has spoken to. I can take that on as a policy learning for any future version of a similar scheme—the public service should take notes in case I am not the one in government—to make sure it is not biased against the rural area.

Mr WOOD: Okay. It is biased against people living in that area.

You announced the gamba army and, under business support, you are looking at unemployed people. This is probably the worst year I have seen for gamba grass in the rural area. It is dreadful; it really is out of hand. What is the government's plans in relation to the gamba army and what sort of money are you looking at to put into this program?

I support the idea. It is a bit late in the season to do it; it should have been done about six months ago.

Mr GUNNER: We flagged this as part of team rebound. We put it in the Green Paper. We thought it was a good idea to be tested by the Economic Reconstruction Commission. It would be fair to say that it has been the most popular idea in the entire paper; it has taken off. The gamba army is hugely popular. We might have to accelerate the thinking around it.

It was in the Green Paper for consideration by the Economic Reconstruction Commission and it has received much support. In terms of the concrete plan, it was to put it out there, test it and have the Economic Reconstruction Commission consider it. While there is no formal plan for government to accelerate that thinking, it has received significant community support.

Mr WOOD: It is probably getting too late to do it; it is seeding. I support what you are doing. It is a great idea, but it needs to go on longer than just the moment; it has to be long-term project.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The Business Improvement Grants—I have some feedback from tenants within shopping centres in Alice Springs who received a letter recently. It might have been earlier this week or late last week. The letter said that the entire shopping centre is only entitled to one Business Improvement Grant and that the individual tenants had to sort out between themselves which business received the grant. I want some clarification on that.

Mr GUNNER: That is not how other grant programs have worked, like Biz Secure and Alcohol Secure, so I am not aware why that would be. Having said that, it also over-subscribed. I will pass that question on to the Chief Executive Officer.

Mr DRABSCH: I will have to take that on notice.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I can provide you with a letter from a tenant.

Madam CHAIR: That is okay. We will put that on notice.

Mr DRABSCH: There have been a number of different cases involving one property.

Question on Notice No 1.2

Madam CHAIR: Member for Araluen, can you restate the question?

Mrs LAMBLEY: Tenants within a local shopping centre in Alice Springs—there is only a few so you can probably guess which one it is—informed me that the government wrote to them saying that there are many tenants within the shopping centre that have applied for Business Improvement Grants and that only one tenant within the shopping centre is entitled to a grant.

Mr GUNNER: Just to clarify, is that a letter from the landlord to the tenants?

Mrs LAMBLEY: No, from the government. I will give you the letter in a minute. The question is: Why is that so and what is the rationale?

Madam CHAIR: Chief Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr GUNNER: I accept the question.

Madam CHAIR: The question asked by the member for Araluen of the Chief Minister has been allocated the number 1.2.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Araluen, do you have a further question on business?

Mrs LAMBLEY: Yes, on the Home Improvement Scheme. Apparently, in the fine print, it says, 'The government reserves the right to cancel this program at any time'. What is that about?

Mr GUNNER: We have done the opposite. We significantly expanded it.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Do you intend to cancel it at any time?

Mr DRABSCH: It is a standard clause.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Okay, the 'get out' clause for when you run out of money? Which must be soon, let us face it.

Madam CHAIR: Mr Drabsch, can you provide the answer to question 1.2?

Answer to Question on Notice No 1.2

Mr DRABSCH: There was advice provided from the agency to the tenants in Alice Springs advising that there could only be one development on one property. That advice was in error and has since been rectified. I will also communicate that in writing to the Member for Araluen.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Drabsch.

Mrs LAMBLEY: No, that is okay. It is on the public record. That is good.

Mrs LAMBLEY: There is a problem with the Home Improvement Scheme. I have heard across the board—the Member for Spillett outlined it—that people who want work done now are putting it on hold and waiting for their grant to come through. On ABC Radio in Alice Springs this morning, there was another business

talking about how their business dropped as a result of the Home Improvement Scheme because of this phenomena.

What are you doing about that? It is backfiring. It is an unintended consequence; I am not pointing the finger, but you need to rectify this. It is having a reverse effect.

Mr GUNNER: There are a couple of things here. We are getting 1000 out per week and the Small Business Survival Fund was a priority in early days. We are getting 1000 out under the HIS. It is just conflating two issues. We put the HIS out immediately, as with Coronavirus hitting, it was an urgent stimulus program. At the same time, Coronavirus hit and there was a contraction across the entire market. One reason we wanted a stimulus measure was because there was a contraction and consumption.

It is a coincidence of timing that HIS was announced and there was a contraction of consumer spending at the same time. Those two things are running right now. We unfortunately have numbers across the board in every sector where they have taken a hit. Even businesses that did not have to close because of Coronavirus have taken a crunch. When people are worried in a pandemic, they do not spend. Unfortunately, that happens and is a reason we ran a stimulus program. We will definitely get the vouchers out quicker but there is also a contraction in consumer spending on top of that.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: That has nothing to do with the question.

Mrs LAMBLEY: So it is just 'suck eggs' is it?

Mr GUNNER: No, it is unintended consequences. That is the impact of Coronavirus across the world.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: One thousand per week still puts us months out from approving them all, so that still gives huge uncertainty to business.

Mr GUNNER: That is the design of the scheme.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: It was your second design of the scheme. Your first design was ...

Mr GUNNER: No, the first design was \$30m over six months and the second design was \$100m over 12, which is more than doubling the amount of money and quadrupling the amount of work. It is a significantly greater amount of work over a significantly greater amount of time to help combat the fact there is a contraction in consumer spending.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Do you not acknowledge the pain that this is causing so many businesses across the Territory? Are you blind to that?

Mr GUNNER: That is why we are accelerating the amount of staff on the scheme and grants that are getting out the door.

Madam CHAIR: We will move on because it is just going back and forth ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Can we not triple the staff?

Mr GUNNER: We have more than done that. We went from 13 to 75, so we more than tripled.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: It is 75, but we are still only doing 1000 a week.

Madam CHAIR: The Member for Brennan has a legitimate question, thank you.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I do not think you are here to comment on the legitimacy of a question, Madam Chair. That is quite over the top.

Madam CHAIR: It is repetitive and I am ruling on it as a repetitive question. You got the answer, whether you like it or not.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You tried to claim that it was illegitimate, which is different to repetitive.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you, Member for Spillett. The Member for Brennan has a question.

Mr SIEVERS: Item three is about business support and the HIS. I am pleased to hear that it is moving along. We understand that the staff are working hard, seven days per week. As the chief said, a lot of forms have not been completed appropriately, which is taking time. I thank all the department staff who are doing that important job.

I will move on to unemployment. We had a scheme for casual workers under 12 months and so forth. How did that pan out? I know that stage 2 came in to place and a lot of casual workers were employed again, but was it a good uptake and how is it going now?

Mr GUNNER: Quite a few businesses took staff back on once they got the regular fortnightly payment, which is great. I support what the federal government did with JobKeeper, which was important. The Commonwealth Government now has an additional \$60bn to make decisions when it comes to Job Keeper. It is a significantly important program.

That was also partnered by Jobs Hub work to help reconnect people who had lost their jobs into other jobs. Can we get the Jobs Hub numbers? Did you read them out earlier? I do not think you did.

Mr DRABSCH: No, Chief, I have them here now. We have had 2531 individual registrations for the Jobs Hub. Some 137 organisations registered. There are connection requests where an organisation contacts an unemployed person who has put their name on the register. Some 2004 of those connection requests have occurred and 847 connections requests were accepted. We do not have precise details about whether or not that turned into an actual job, but it facilitated the opportunity for unemployed people—to make sure people are aware of their availability—and also for organisations such as farmers—who were an integral part of establishing the scheme—to identify opportunities for unemployed people.

Cathy, would you like to say anything more on that?

Ms WHITE: Yes. We have worked very hard as a jurisdiction and very collaboratively with the Business Enterprise Centre, the Chamber, industry peaks and a lot of different organisations that support small business. One of our main interest how we connect people who did not have work anymore to work that is available.

The Jobs Hub was stood up extremely quickly. We did it within about 48 hours. The take-up was fantastic. A lot of businesses, including agribusiness, found it very simple and quick to find people who are looking for short- or long-term work.

We do not know exactly what impact that had as far as keeping people employed. We know that there were other really good schemes. The Small Business Survival was a good scheme; JobKeeper is a very effective scheme, with 4500 businesses taking advantage of that. Looking at our unemployment statistics, we have done pretty well considering the national statistics.

I have the jobactive caseload. In the Territory, this is a bit problematic because regional and remote comes under the CDP, so that is not covered in here. This is Darwin and Alice Springs. If we look at the jobactive caseload nationally, there has been 120% increase in the numbers from 29 February to 17 May. Essentially, the number of people on jobactive has gone to 1.395 million. There has been a 78% increase in the Northern Territory, but that is in comparison to 120% increase, nationally.

We also know that the jobseeker allowance is more generous at the moment. Again, it is about keeping money and helping the Territory move through. We moved from a caseload of 5259 job seekers on 29 February to 9381 as at 17 May. We are hoping that all of the initiatives we are putting in place—the stimulus measures—are part of that story.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Can I just clarify? Was that 9381 people unemployed, but actively looking for work? Is that what that figure is?

Ms WHITE: Yes, registered with jobactive or JobSeeker.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: So that figure could be higher?

Ms WHITE: When we take into account the regional and remote, absolutely.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: It would be.

Ms WHITE: That is only Darwin and Alice Springs.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Brennan, did you want to a supplementary?

Mr SIEVERS: When you were saying that our mango farms and things like that did not suffer job loss because ...

Mr DRABSCH: If I may. There are issues about the timing of when to harvest and pick. There is the previous availability of Seasonal Worker Program and other schemes and the reliance on backpackers. Whether this mechanism helps fill that gap—I will not claim it has completely resolved it. It provides a mechanism that is online and easy to use and can continue to be used over the coming weeks and months as the various crops need to be processed.

Mr GUNNER: It would be reasonable to say that it did not completely substitute for the labour workforce that farmers will need for their crops to be picked. Obviously, it depends now on how international borders are handled with the Seasonal Worker Program or other things. That is still an issue to be sorted through.

Mr COSTA: Some constituents out bush in my electorate were inquiring if there is another round of the JobSeeker funding.

Madam CHAIR: Are we talking about the federal one?

Mr COSTA: Yes.

Mr GUNNER: JobSeeker and JobKeeper have end dates. The current indications from the Australian Government are that there will not be a continuation of the JobSeeker program. That is something they will have to make a decision about because it increased significantly to what it was previously. That will be a national question about how people go back to what they were on before and how they handle it. They have indicated it will end at that point in time.

There is additional money available to them now under the JobKeeper program, which is the \$60bn. There have been suggestions about how they might be able to use that money from expanding who is eligible within the current window and still ending it in September—or do you change the cliff into a beach and provide that money ongoing to targeted sectors like tourism and hospitality for longer. There has been no indication from the Australian Government about JobSeeker continuing.

Mr WOOD: The program that you said would help with unemployed people—I assume there are two lots of unemployed; the existing unemployed and the unemployed as a result of COVID-19.

Mr GUNNER: They are categorised as ‘withdrawn’. They have withdrawn from the workforce but they are not actually unemployed because the job technically is still there when the business comes out of hibernation.

Mr WOOD: Was it realistic to say to people that they would get jobs out bush in agriculture? There is the timing, the skills and the hard labour required. A grower from Lambells Lagoon dropped into my office the other day and said that getting skilled people who can drive a tractor, drive a forklift, pick up watermelons and move pipe around are not easy to get. Whilst this program was put up as a bit of an answer to a problem, has anyone looked at it and asked if it was realistic? And, the next time we do something like this do we need to be less utopian?

Mr GUNNER: There is an important clarification to be made there. It helped matchmake between people wanting a job and needing a job done. Obviously you have to look at the CV and see if a person fitted. It did not waste anyone’s time, it was just a quick and easy way to check if a person might be suitable for employment. It helped fill a hole, but it was not the total answer to the fact there was a hole. I think it was a useful program. I do not think any of us ever said it would solve everyone’s issues but it helped match people up.

Mr WOOD: There was a lot of publicity about it, especially in relation to horticultural crops. I wonder whether that was realistic. You want people with experience and skills for those jobs. It is not easy for someone to leave a coffee shop in Darwin and all of a sudden pick watermelons in Ali Curung.

Mr GUNNER: That is a very fair comment but there was a limit on who was available. We have to recognise that there was a change to the labour market and this was a way of potentially matching a worker to a job.

We needed to use that and provide as much assistance as possible. I did not think we could provide a worker to every job, but at least we tried to fill the holes.

God willing, we never have an issue like this again, but if we did I would say this could be a useful way of helping people in the short-term. It would not be the ideal way of going through these things. I do not think anything in the last two months has been the ideal way, you just have to roll with it.

Mr WOOD: The gamba army is still a good idea.

Mr GUNNER: The gamba army is a great idea.

Madam CHAIR: Mr Drabsch, do you wish to add to that?

Mr DRABSCH: We have some anecdotes and success stories from the scheme. Rombola Family Farms filled a vacancy with a pilot from Hardy Aviation—he was not only skilled but probably over-qualified—through the Territory Jobs Hub. The pilot brought his friend, who is also a pilot, to the interview and they got a job at the melon farm. They will be doing work like loading hay and driving tractors. That gave the person who provided the information—said she would use the Territory Jobs Hub again when the harvesting season comes. Getting word of mouth out to other farmers about how it can bring positive results will help with the success of the scheme.

Mr WOOD: Would you have a review of what happens, so you could say it did work or it partially worked? Because that would be important.

MR DRABSCH: Absolutely. We are proposing to do a survey to get a richer vein of data about whether these requests have turned into actual jobs and ways to enhance and improve the scheme going forward.

Mr GUNNER: On that note, I can give you confidence, Member for Nelson, we will look at the range of things we did during the pandemic to see if they needed to become part of business as usual. I think that is important and was commented on earlier. Sorry, you were not here.

We have a healthier school population than ever before because of the range of things we have done over the last couple of months to make sure we protect people from Coronavirus. Obviously, the things we do to protect people from Coronavirus protects us from everything else. To what extent do we imbed those into ordinary school practice and have a very healthy school population?

Mr WOOD: Numbers at school are still a problem, Chief Minister, especially in remote communities.

Mr GUNNER: We are keeping at school because they are not having sick days. As you know the magic number about having attended more 80% of days in a year, which is critical to whether your education is good, that number will now be more likely to be met.

Mrs WORDEN: Keeping us back to business support, I will check with members to see if they have further questions in this area.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Could I please get a breakdown of it by regions? Chief Minister, you said you have given a direction that the Home Improvement Scheme should be allocated fairly across the Territory. Can I get a breakdown of how many applications you have for Katherine, Darwin, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs, Nhulunbuy and then how many have been approved?

MR DRABSCH: In terms of applications received or approved, 12% of the 19 573 applications came from Alice Springs; 46% from Darwin suburbs; Daly-Tiwi-West Arnhem, 3%; Darwin rural, 14%; from East Arnhem there are 33 applications and 3% from Katherine 3%—542 applications; Palmerston 22; and Tennant Creek, 100 applications. In terms of the approvals, those shares are fairly consistent.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You do not have the exact number?

MR DRABSCH: I can say per applications approved or vouchers issued by regions ...

Mr GUNNER: You can take it on notice if you want.

MR DRABSCH: I can take it on notice.

Mr GUNNER: Yes, do not make it up.

MR DRABSCH: I have the numbers here.

Mr GUNNER: Oh you have it? Alright, okay.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: And I want it, thank you.

MR DRABSCH: Alice Springs—187 applications approved, 201 vouchers, approved funding \$1m supporting \$1.6m of works.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Sorry, can I just ask, because you gave percentages the first time round and then numbers, can you make it comparable. If it is 187 how many were applied?

MR DRABSCH: Ten per cent of the total. Daly-Tiwi-West Arnhem had 28 applications, which is 1% of the total—29 issued vouchers, \$158 000 in funding. The total cost of works \$222 000. That is the value of works that is being undertaken.

Darwin and suburbs had 881 applications approved, which is 47% of the total—948 vouchers issued. The total value of approved funding is \$4.89m and the total cost of works stimulated by this \$8.29m.

Darwin rural had 303 applications, which is 16% of the total. There were 316 voucher issued, to a funding of \$1.7m supporting works to the value of \$2.7m.

East Arnhem had three applications approved—three vouchers. That is \$15 000 of funding for \$36 000 of work.

Katherine had 29 applications approved, which is 2% of the total. There were 31 vouchers issued. That is \$148 000 in grants approved with \$273 000 of work.

Palmerston and suburbs had 456 applications, which is 24% of the total. There were 486 vouchers issued. That is \$2.4m of grants provided, supporting \$3.8m of works.

Two in Tennant Creek, which is \$11 000 in grants, supporting \$15 000.

Just for the Home Improvement Scheme that is \$10.4m of grants provided, supporting \$16.9m of works. That is well above the \$6000 for \$2000 contribution. Territorians are making additional contributions beyond the \$2000 to support local businesses, which we are very grateful for.

Mr GUNNER: The one thing missing from those numbers is the work rate. It is the ones approved, not the ones withdrawn, declined or still needing more information. That is an additional ...

Mr DRABSCH: That is the 1889 applications I mentioned, of the 2466 assessed or under assessment.

Mr GUNNER: It does not break down the work rate. There is a small caveat on it.

Mr DRABSCH: Only 178 were withdrawn or declined.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: On unemployment, 9381 Territorians in Darwin and Alice Springs are currently unemployed and seeking employment. What figures are you projecting, particularly when JobKeeper ends?

Mr GUNNER: Do we have the employment data from the other day? This might be better for Treasury to talk to some elements of this.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Does this mean we can ask questions on the budget? Heaven forbid.

Mr GUNNER: That is further down, at item 5.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: With only 35 minutes to go, I do not know if we will get there.

Mr GUNNER: It was also in the opener, and no one asked me a question on it.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Rubbish! You are very clever—slippery.

Madam CHAIR: If we want to we can move there quite quickly. We can move to questions under item 5. It is at the committee's discretion.

Mr GUNNER: They slept through the opener, Madam Chair.

If we can discuss unemployment—some observers, like Deloitte, have noted that we will have the best comeback and the shallowest hit because of the way we managed the Coronavirus situation. We will start with Shaun on how we have gone with wages and those issues.

Mr DRABSCH: I will talk about the drivers impacting upon that trend and the fact we are moving out of restrictions much earlier than most other jurisdictions. Opening businesses and getting people back to work is certainly helping. It is difficult to make forecasts of what the impacts will ultimately be. There are other areas where we still have stage 3 restrictions to be lifted in the next week.

In regard to the forecast of unemployment, regularity and statistics, I will defer to Mr Graham.

Mr GRAHAM: We do not have forecasts of employment or unemployment, but we have real-time data, or as close to real-time data as we can. ABS is publishing a special data series based on ATO payroll data. That is indicating that we experienced the smallest decline in the number of employees. We had a 4% reduction as at 14 March. The number of employees in the Northern Territory decreased by 4%, compared to 8.4% in Victoria and 5.9% in Western Australia. Nationally the number was 7.3%.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: That was 14 March?

Mr GRAHAM: Sorry, that is between 14 March and 2 May.

Mr WOOD: Chief Minister, you announced that there would be a 50% reduction in electricity, water and sewerage costs to businesses. I did not realise they have to apply for that, it is not a broad-brush ...

Mr GUNNER: A hardship register.

Mr WOOD: Can you say how many businesses have applied and what the percentage of the whole of businesses are taking that up?

Mr GUNNER: For the hardship register we used the same test as JobKeeper, and we were able to use some data with the Australian Tax Office to help us in processing the hardship register applications. Some businesses did very well under Coronavirus, with an increase in sales. This is about making sure we passed on the relief to businesses that needed it. We have the hardship register numbers.

Mr WOOD: I was of the understanding that if businesses, such as landlords said they would help their tenants et cetera, they could apply for this relief.

Mr GUNNER: As well, yes.

Mr WOOD: Is that called hardship? I just thought it was a scheme to enable people to get a reduction in their electricity, water and sewerage, as long as they did this, this and this. If you did not, you did not get it.

Mr GUNNER: Yes, we created a common hardship register under which a number of benefits could flow. One of them—obviously, the one we are in control of—is the payroll and the power, water and sewerage. The other was rate relief or landlord negotiations et cetera. It was there as an ability for you to register hardship proven and go onto a register—tick, you are a business that has done it hard and proven that you have done it hard.

Mr WOOD: Did the businesses have to show that they have done some work helping reduce, say, rent for tenants?

Mr GUNNER: For landlords to qualify, we said to qualify you must have done the right thing by your tenants. That was the landlords' code, which was a proportionate reduction in rent—a 50% split between waiver and deferral. Essentially, we have provided a guide to what landlords should do if they wanted to qualify for the hardship register. But we put a catch on landlords.

The philosophy of National Cabinet was that everyone needs to take a hit. Businesses cannot avoid the hit, so how do landlords, governments and councils all take a bit of a hit as well. The philosophy of National Cabinet was that if we all take a little hit, we might all be able to get through it. We applied that philosophy to the hardship register to help people hibernate.

Do you want the numbers of the ...

Mr WOOD: Yes, please.

Mr DRABSCH: You qualify for the Business Hardship Register if you have a reduction of turnover of greater than 30% and are a business with a total turnover of less than \$50m. It is designed pretty much to reflect the criteria of the JobKeeper program, as distinct from the Small Business Survival Fund. It means that anyone who has been found eligible for JobKeeper or the Small Business Survival Fund, that is the automatic way of being qualified for the Business Hardship Register. They just have to go online, provide that evidence and they are on.

So far, 883 have been received, 463 are assessed or under assessment and 297 have been approved. A certificate is issued once that is provided to the business. That enables them to go to Jacana, Power and Water Corporation and Treasury to claim their 50% concession, or waiver on payroll tax if it is less than \$7.5m in payroll.

Landlords must have a 30% reduction in turnover, but they are also required to attest that they have sought to negotiate with tenants who are in hardship to reduce their rents by a similar amount that their turnover has reduced. That is the obligation under the National Cabinet code of conduct.

Mr GUNNER: With a 30% reduction in turnover, they should get a 15% rent waiver and a 15% rent deferral.

Mr WOOD: And then they will get 50% off their water, sewerage and electricity?

Mr GUNNER: Yes.

Mr WOOD: That is the way it works?

Mr GUNNER: Yes, that is right—a proportionate response.

Mr DRABSCH: And rates.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Araluen, further questions on this output area?

Mrs LAMBLEY: No.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Arafura?

Mr COSTA: No.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Brennan?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What about me?

Madam CHAIR: I started with you, so I am coming back. Do you have further questions on this area?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Yes, what numbers have been approved for the waiver of payroll tax?

Mr GUNNER: That would be the hardship register number 2. Mr Graham.

Mr GRAHAM: From what I understand, about 14% of the businesses that have been approved for hardship are in the payroll tax base.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What is the anticipated forgone revenue of that?

Mr GRAHAM: It is an estimate. We have estimated about \$14m from the waiver and another \$30m for deferral.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Going back to unemployment rate. It was Deloitte—correct me if I am wrong—anticipated that there would be about 21 500 job losses throughout the Territory. What is the government doing to stop that eventuating?

Mr GUNNER: I believe that the 21 000 was not a good estimate. That does not reflect anything we even got close to. We have opened every business up quicker than anyone else, so we have allowed people to get back to work quicker than the rest of the country by tackling the health crisis.

All advice from the Reserve Bank Governor, the Secretary of the federal Treasury, et cetera, was, 'You have to deal with the health crisis first. Dealing with that allows you to deal with the economic impacts.' We have done that and we have been able to allow those businesses to open. The 21 000 figure—I do not know if you want comment Mr Drabsch—has not been reflected by others.

Mr DRABSCH: I do not want to reflect on Deloitte and its forecast.

Mr GUNNER: Do not offend Deloitte; it does very good work. In this instance, we might disagree with them.

Mr DRABSCH: In terms of the job impacts in the Territory, there have been reductions of more than 20% in the accommodation and hospitality areas. Most other sectors had a reduction of less than 10%. That goes to the fact that while we have the borders closed, there have been exemptions for mines, power stations and gas pipelines to continue to operate. Those activities have continued to occur as well as the road transport and freight systems. The JobKeeper program has been quite important in keeping people on as well as the stimulus programs, survival funds and other programs this government has provided.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What is the economic plan to get the Territory out of this situation? We went into COVID-19 very weak, the worst performing economy in the nation ...

Mr GUNNER: That is not actually correct.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: and blown budget. So what is the plan coming out? Do we have to wait until November for the Reconstruction Commission report? Is that your position, Chief Minister?

Mr GUNNER: We were experiencing the benefit of—unfortunately before Coronavirus hit we were on the upswing so we had a significant increase in the labour force figures, for example.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: The green shoots.

Mr GUNNER: Yes, the green shoots were coming through quite strongly. So Coronavirus came through at a very bad time for the Northern Territory because we were on the uptick. We were going to have an excellent mid-year in the centre and the north. Everything was looking extremely positive. It was very bad timing for the Territory. We had an improvement in the March quarterlies. We were going in a really positive direction. Those things hold fundamentally true, which is why we have been predicted to have the best comeback in the country. Those things still hold.

Today, for example, Santos confirmed the purchase of the ConocoPhillips assets. They did that for a reason. They see significant benefits in the NT. We have a lot of projects on the way.

The work of the Reconstruction Commission obviously is to clear a way and provide a focus on some of the things we need to be concentrating on. There is a lot you can do as a government but it is not about spreading yourself too thin. It is about making sure we get the private sector and the Australian Government investing.

The Territory government is doing a lot of heavy lifting already to make sure we get the private sector and the Australian Government on board as well in a positive way.

This is an investment opportunity. There are huge wins out of this and what we are already working on, like being the manufacturing capital of the country, will tie in nicely with what the NCCC is considering and recommending as well. We can hit the ground running post-Coronavirus.

The first step in rebounding is opening up and we are opening up faster than anywhere else. We are already well and truly into the first plans of how you come out of Coronavirus. That is by having the hard borders and open businesses, which is a great result for Territorians. I thank them. We are well advanced on other states and territories on coming out of this.

Madam CHAIR: Under Treasurer, you wanted to make a brief statement?

Mr GRAHAM: Member for Spillett, apologies, I provided the wrong estimates before for payroll tax foregone. The numbers are actually \$12m for the waiver and \$50m for the deferral. That is a worst-case scenario assuming full take-up of the hardship package.

Madam CHAIR: I will move onto enforcement issues.

Mr WOOD: I asked the CEO of Health about this during the week. Has the government got some sort of plan that would allow people to come across the border that would not allow them necessarily to quarantine but to be checked? In other words, could they have to fill in their names to say where they are going to stay, they could get a temperature check and show where they have been before they cross the border.

There could be a way that people could come in to the Territory but with limitations from the point of view of just crossing the border. They would have to provide details of where they are going, where they came from and those sorts of things. Do you have some sort of plan that would slowly allow people to come through without having to quarantine?

Mr GUNNER: Perhaps I can go through what I announced today and that might answer some of your questions. It is not exactly as you described. From June 15 it is mandatory self-quarantine with testing, so you can come across the hard border and nominate where you will quarantine. If you are a Territorian returning home, you can quarantine at home. That will time well for the end of school holidays down south or the school holiday break so kids can come home and essentially quarantine with their parents with the right controls in place, following the health advice.

That is not a complete answer to your question but it does create a greater ability, mainly for Territorians, to be able to cross the border and come home. If you are a visitor you will be quarantining in a hotel for 14 days with those tests in place. There is that arrangement there.

Of you want an approved entry into the Territory, that can also be done. We have obviously done that for a range of people from truckies to FIFOs. As long as you have an approved plan cleared by the Chief Health Officer, that is also there.

Does that answer your question Member for Nelson?

Mr WOOD: I just wonder whether we can have something that gives people a feeling of security, allowing people to come across the border, like health checks. You can do a health check, you can do a temperature check, even if everyone has to have the app, all those sorts of things can be put in place.

Mr GUNNER: I think we discussed this, there is advice around not being able to say that you must have the app. I will get the Police Commissioner to talk a little about how the borders work in practice, which might help.

Commissioner CHALKER: I think the question that you are asking, Member for Nelson, is about whether there is an ability for people to come into the Territory and move a bit more freely and just have various touch points. The fact of the matter is, if somebody comes across our borders and is unaware they are a COVID-19 carrier, they are our greatest risk.

All the restrictions that have been lifted to date and those aimed for June 5 and June 15 are to protect the environment for Territorians to be able to move around in, because for all intents and purposes we have made it a COVID-19-free zone.

If we start letting anybody come into our borders—that is our only means of COVID-19 coming into our borders—you introduce the likelihood of risk and increase the level of risk with every individual who comes through.

We have managed to mitigate that through the essential workers originally—and ensuring that our freight lines continue and other health support and specialist areas—with the provision of approved plans that strongly mitigate their freedoms when they come here. It is not a case that they are able to come in and move around completely unfettered. They have to comply with a number of things to ensure they are minimising any likelihood that, if they are even a potential carrier, they can transfer COVID-19 to the Territory.

We are going through a raft of scenario planning as we build towards a future, post our borders—in their current state—coming down, to ascertain how we mitigate that. Again we go to the latest health advice that does not give any level of comfort that a negative test on day 1 will tell you that somebody does not have the potential of becoming infected with COVID-19 by later in that 14-day period.

Mr WOOD: I suppose what I am looking at is, we know that New Zealand and Australia are talking about a bubble. If South Australia does not have any new cases, for instance, could we have a bubble between South Australia and the Northern Territory?

Mr GUNNER: The Prime Minister of New Zealand today said that September may be realistic for that bubble, but I am not giving you a date and I will never give you a date. We still do not know when that bubble may or may not occur. What I said previously is that once you tear a hole in the net, there is a whole in the net.

I think you are better doing all the borders at once and there would not be much of a gap between one border and the others anyway, so from a practical point of view you are better off doing it at the same time. That is our opinion and it is not new. The Commissioner can talk to this.

There is a porous border between SA and Victoria, it is not South Australia's fault; there are a lot of roads between SA and Victoria. There is porous border between New South Wales and Queensland. Again not Queensland's fault; it is just a well-connected border. They have more roads than we do.

We have less connection points, so we have greater control over our borders. That is similar to Western Australia but Western Australia had that outbreak in the Kimberley. It was that type outbreak we want to avoid. I think it is getting to a position where we can make a decision about the borders, but all the borders at the same time.

Minister Fyles wanted to talk about your previous question; she has some more detail.

Ms FYLES: We were talking about people entering the Northern Territory in the opening statement. The symptoms can be so mild that someone might not realise they have the virus. The 14-day period for quarantine is based on clinical advice. It might be day 10 or day 11 that somebody tests positive to the Coronavirus. It is not as straight forward as someone coming in and being checked for a symptom, such as a fever, or testing at that point to say that they are good to go. The Chief Minister announced today that people entering still having self-quarantine—I am not sure if that answers your question.

Mr WOOD: I was wondering if there was any scientific move to be able to quickly check people. I understand what you are saying but it is an issue that ...

Mr GUNNER: My understanding is that temperature checks can be misleading. You can have Coronavirus and still not have a temperature or you can have a temperature and not have Coronavirus. The test results can be useful but the only thing that works in practice is the 14-day quarantine. I am speaking in Dr Heggie's specialty area.

Ms FYLES: We have asked many questions about this. As the Chief Minister said, we do not want to give someone false hope when they enter and take a test that comes back negative. We do not want them to take that as a stamp of approval and enter the community. We had one case that tested positive on day 13, which is quite late in the quarantine period. It is not easy or simple but it is based on clinical evidence.

Mr GUNNER: It goes to the same reason that masks are not recommended in Australia. It protects people from you, but does not protect you from people and gives a false sense of confidence. The health principles are much better at providing a safe environment. It is important not to put in place measures that may lead to the result you are trying to avoid.

Mr WOOD: We do not want political face masks, as in America.

Mr GUNNER: Yes, the Biden-Trump debate.

Professor STODDART: The 14-day period of quarantine is the gold standard and what we would expect to do. As the evidence is taken on board by AHPPC, which is the national advisory body to the National Cabinet, that may change. At this stage, from a clinical perspective, 14 days is what we expect,.

Commissioner CHALKER: It is important—about where we granted approvals for people under a compliance plan. Many people coming in and out have zero contact with Territorians at all. The plans have

such rigor that they operate within bubbles of their own environments with zero contact. If we look at the whole term since we started quarantine and the various restriction environments in place—we moved to contactless areas, particularly along roadhouses where people come through.

We reduced likelihood of transfer as much as we reasonably can. That is why we were able to create this safe environment in the Territory. If we open it up for all and sundry to come across without checks in place, our risk rises exponentially.

Answer to Question on Notice No 1.1

Mr GUNNER: I have the answer to Question on Notice number 1.1.

The safety and wellbeing of students is of the upmost importance of the Department of Education. Accordingly, schools are required to undertake careful planning and clear and comprehensive risk assessment before embarking on any school excursions. They are also required to ensure that parents are fully informed of activities planned during excursions so they can provide informed consent for their child's participation.

Documentation required for a school excursion varies depending on a number of factors, including the length of the excursion, destination, if it involves an overnight stay and whether swimming or water activities are planned. The primary form that schools are required to complete is just over four pages long, including excursion details, details of attending students and accompanying adults, details of how the excursion relates to the education program, costs and a risk assessment.

A copy of the relevant template is attached. The only changes to this document in processes arising from COVID-19 are mitigation strategies of an included template risk assessment to help schools ensure appropriate physical distancing and hygiene practices during the excursion and that principals are temporarily required to seek the approval of their senior director for category B excursions.

Other documents that may be applicable are parental consent forms for each student, swimming forms, self-inspection checklists and movement requisitions approving the travel of any staff members. None of these required changes as a result of COVID-19.

They are happy to help if any school is concerned. The maximum length of a document now is eight pages. I am not sure where the 19 came from, but we can work off-line with what happened with that school.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Is it true that Territorians will be paying \$40m for repairs to the prison due to the riot?

Mr GUNNER: There are a couple of things to note. There is a PPP in place; a formal criminal investigation occurring; and costs are still being worked on. That is an ordinary PAC question. I am sure the PAC is welcome to look at that during ordinary PAC time. I am happy to take questions on Coronavirus and the impacts on expenditure.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: The speculation is that the riot was caused because of Coronavirus. There is not a lot of information about it. The government has certainly played it down, but a significant thing must have taken place to cause so much damage.

Mr GUNNER: There is a criminal investigation, which we cannot talk about. It is not so much playing it down, it is just how any criminal investigation is handled. During ordinary PAC time, we are more than happy to look at the prison.

Madam CHAIR: I am happy to put that on notice, if you want to ask that question specifically.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I do not think the Chief Minister will take it on notice. If he is happy to take it, I will repeat the question.

Madam CHAIR: The title of this is Territory's COVID response and territory finances relating to that ...

Mr GUNNER: I will not waste any more time. If he does not want to answer it, that is fine.

Mr GUNNER: The Attorney-General is offering to make a short statement on the topic.

Madam CHAIR: We will reconvene—we have a PAC meeting and we will deal with it separately.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What is our current debt position?

Mr GUNNER: We released the actuals at the March sittings. As I said in my opener, which people were not listening to, we will release the best, most reliable numbers we have on 29 July.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Do you not know what our debt is at this point in time?

Mr GUNNER: I have answered that. We gave you the actuals.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Are you saying the Northern Territory Government has no oversight on its debt position?

Madam CHAIR: I am making a ruling, Member for Spillett. I allowed some latitude earlier. Standing Order 109: Manner and Form of Questions—questions cannot be debated. If you ask a question, you need to allow the person the time to answer the question. We are not debating back and forth. You are also not meant to make inferences, imputations, insults or hypothetical matters—including arguments. It will apply from here on. We need to finish because there are some specific questions ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Are you directing these comments to the Chief Minister, Madam Chair? My question was very specific. Does the government know what its debt position is?

Madam CHAIR: Please, Member for Spillett! No interruption. This is your last chance.

Mr GUNNER: I answered that. We do. We released the March quarterlies and we will release the next ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: No—to date.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Does the Treasurer know what the net debt is at the moment?

Ms MANISON: Yes.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Good! Can you share that?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Here we go! What is it?

Madam CHAIR: Members for Spillett and Araluen, can you separate your questions, please. It is not a tag-team event.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: We have the same question.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Spillett, please reiterate your question. If you are asking one of the Treasurer—can you address the Chief Minister with that question and we will allow him to answer.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I did! He said, 'We told you in March'.

Madam CHAIR: It is not about arguing or debate. Ask a plain question.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What is the current net debt?

Mr GUNNER: We can provide them with the answer we have already provided.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The Treasurer knows, though.

Mr GUNNER: It is already on the public record.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You are gagging your own Treasurer. She just said she knows the answer, so flick it to her and she will answer it.

Madam CHAIR: Treasurer, do you wish to answer the question.

Ms MANISON: The Chief Minister has been very clear. This is all outlined in the March quarterly report, which we are here to discuss today.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Can you remind us what the net debt of the Northern Territory is at the moment, Treasurer?

Ms MANISON: As you will see in the March quarterly report, on page 32, it outlines where we are with net debt. It shows that we are ahead of where we were aiming to be. We came in at a better level than we were expecting in the March quarterly, as did all the fiscal aggregates. We are looking at \$5.49bn, but I need to be clear that the March quarterly results do not indicate what the June quarterly results will look like, due to COVID-19.

We have been up front with people about that. The bulk of the revenue hits that the Northern Territory will take, where we will see the full washout of the Coronavirus, will come through the June quarter. As long as we do not have a second wave of Coronavirus and as long as we keep it out of the Northern Territory.

The March quarter came in better than we were expecting. We worked very hard to get there, then came the Coronavirus and the implications of that. We are well and truly in the thick of it now. We are not back to the full opening of our economy yet. We are looking forward to seeing more business open on 5 June but we will see more results coming through in the June quarter.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What is your estimated forecast for the end of this financial year and the end of next financial year?

Ms MANISON: At this point we will have, as the Chief Minister said in his opening statement, our best numbers released in late July. We will have them there for everybody to see.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Does that mean your government does not know? You have no ...

Madam CHAIR: No interruptions, please.

Mr GUNNER: Can we just pause here? Unfortunately, I think there is some fiscal ignorance on the other side. Treasury does a ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: We are looking at incompetence.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Far out. The man who has led the Territory into the biggest hole we have ever been in.

Madam CHAIR: We are not here to insult each other. It is very clear under Standing Order 109(2)(e): no insults. Could we please keep to tight questions and allow the Chief Minister to answer.

Mr GUNNER: In ordinary times, which we are not in, the quarterlies for June to the end of financial year would come out mid to late August. The Treasurer's Annual Financial Report, which reconciles the full financial year, comes out in October. That is the normal work rate for Treasury and when you know these things, in an ordinary year.

We are not in an ordinary year. We are in an extraordinary year. We are in a once-in-a-generation crisis. It is no surprise that unfortunately, right now, Treasury have less information than they normally have. What we have said is that on 29 July, we will provide a Coronavirus financial report which shows what we have done, why we have done it and what the forecasts are as a result. This is an acceleration of the ordinary timeline for that information to be available. So more information, earlier, is what we are doing in a once-in-a-generation crisis. That is an incredible amount of work from Treasury.

Mrs LAMBLEY: You have brilliantly reframed this Chief Minister.

Mr GUNNER: It is unfortunate that ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: You are going from impossible to being so facilitating.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Does that mean we are no longer getting forward estimates in June?

Mrs LAMBLEY: The hypocrisy is unbelievable.

Mr SIEVERS: I would like to hear the answer.

Madam CHAIR: Members! Stop interrupting please. We would all like to hear the rest of the answer. The Member for Nelson is quite patiently waiting to ask a question.

Mr WOOD: Treasurer, it says on page 32 that there is \$5.492bn debt. That says, 'Year to date, March'. Why is it not possible to do year to date, May?

Mrs LAMBLEY: Good question!

Ms MANISON: Because this is the actuals, Member for Nelson.

Mrs LAMBLEY: It is because they do not want to.

Ms MANISON: It takes time for people to go through agency by agency, line item by line item, to look at how their departments and agencies are performing. Even when we put together the end of the year results, we will be going against a time line like we have never seen before to try to get the latest up-to-date information out by the end of July.

It is important to understand that these numbers will not be the final numbers you will see in October when we get our Treasurer's Annual Financial Report. This is not a straightforward process. It is not as easy as pressing a button and getting all the answers. It is quite a robust process. I will hand over to the Under Treasurer to talk a bit more about it.

Mr GUNNER: Can I just add one more comment before we pass to Mr Graham? The end of the March quarterlies came out six weeks after the end of March. As per the advice from Treasury, the end of financial year, or the July quarterlies, will come out six to eight weeks after that. That is how long it takes them to process the quarterly information. There is a significant amount of work to get that information.

It is not being portrayed, unfortunately, accurately by the opposition parties. This is what we are doing; we will provide more information earlier than we normally do, which I think is a credit to Treasury.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You can dress this up any way you like, Chief Minister. What you are saying is that you have no idea of the position your government is in. You have no idea of the debt, no idea of the deficit, no projections. You either have the information or do you not.

Mr GUNNER: That is not correct.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Spillett, you are out of order. Questions are not to be debated.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Are you thinking of providing forward estimates in June, like you said that you would?

Madam CHAIR: This is the Member for Nelson's question. The Chief Minister is answering the question from the Member for Nelson. This question is not to be debated. Chief Minister?

Mr GUNNER: Everything the Member for Spillett said just then is incorrect. We gave the government's position for the end of the March quarter. We will give the government's position for the end of the financial year, as well. We will be doing it earlier than we normally would, with more information.

Let us be really clear; we are doing everything we can during this Coronavirus crisis—a once-in-a-generation crisis—to save lives and jobs. I need the best information possible to be able to do that. That is what we are doing.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I have a question ...

Madam CHAIR: Hang on a minute. No.

Mr GUNNER: Mr Graham was to add to that answer.

Madam CHAIR: Mr Graham first, then the Member for Brennan has a question.

Mrs LAMBLEY: There will be no time for anyone else.

Mr GRAHAM: It is difficult to provide an estimate of net debt at this point in time, because the COVID-19 response is still rolling out; we are still receiving applications for the Home Improvement Scheme; revenues are still moving; and net debt is a stop measure. It measures our debt liabilities at a point in time, so attempting to provide an estimate at this point—we could provide an estimate now and tomorrow it will change.

Mrs LAMBLEY: But is that not normal?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: That is always the way ...

Mr GUNNER: No.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Things always change, regardless of COVID-19.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: We know the funds that been allocated to each package; we know the max. There is \$100m for home improvement, \$50m for business survival. We know how much money we will spend—full gone revenue has already been predicted.

Ms MANISON: It is important to note, Leader of the Opposition, that we have not been given any projections from the federal government with regards to the GST pool. Prior to COVID-19, we were talking about a slowdown of the Australian economy. We also saw that the Australian economy had been hit big due to the bushfires. We were talking about negative growth for the first time since, I think, the late 1980s, early 1990s, in the Australian economy in those GDP figures. Australia had slowed down significantly.

We already knew that the GST pool would take a hit. Then COVID-19 has come along and we expect that this will blow it right out of the water. Every jurisdiction will be hurt by the GST revenues. The Northern Territory will take a hit from that GST pool. That is the revenue that accounts for somewhat between about 42%—at times it has been about 50%—of the Territory budget. We had seen it significantly drop over the years, well below our tenure average.

That is a big part of the revenues that we need to know. We have been very up front and honest with Territorians when it comes to what we are spending and what we are doing right now to invest in saving jobs, stimulating the economy and supporting local businesses. We have ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: Why did you say it was impossible to provide this information before the election and now it is? Why have you gone from impossible to possible?

Mr GUNNER: No, again ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: Allow him to answer. please. Without interruption.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Answer honestly, Chief Minister.

Mr GUNNER: I have answered this a couple of times this week. We are now expecting from the Australian government a GST estimate during June. We have crushed Coronavirus in the Northern Territory and Australia is now rapidly crushing Coronavirus around the country. Things are settling in a far quicker rate than was originally expected. As a result, we believe that we can provide, at the end of July, the Coronavirus financial report about where things stand.

We have seen a rapidly improving situation in this country. Unfortunately, it remains a fact that how people shop and spend in Sydney has a greater impact on our revenues than how people shop and spend in the Territory. The fact the Territory has been awesome is great, it is good for the local economy. But in our budget revenues, what is happening in Sydney is more important.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: How much of the \$300m Treasury ...

Madam CHAIR: No, Member for Spillett. A number of questions were here in front of us that we have yet to ask. The Member for Brennan had a question and we are a minute away from finishing. In the interest of making sure we have the questions in front of us answered—I have ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: But what is there ...

Madam CHAIR: Hang on a minute!

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Where do those questions come from?

Madam CHAIR: Member for Spillett! If you did not keep talking over and interrupting all the time we might have got through them.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Well, I asked a question and he could have answered it by now.

Madam CHAIR: No. We have six questions that I would like to place on notice.

Mr GUNNER: I am happy to accept those questions on notice.

Madam CHAIR: These are questions that the PAC was particularly interested in before today. That may include stimulus packages, medical equipment, additional staff and direct overtime costs.

Question on Notice 1.3

Madam CHAIR: What has the NTG spent directly as a result of COVID-19?

Question on Notice 1.4

Madam CHAIR: Are there further indirect costs to the Northern Territory Government as a result of COVID-19? That may include indirect overtime for backfilling roles that assisted with COVID-19 responses, costs associated with enabling remote work forces that are not clearly currently identifiable.

Question on Notice 1.5

Madam CHAIR: How have these costs been funded or paid for?

Question on Notice 1.6

Madam CHAIR: Has the Northern Territory Government needed to borrow more during 2019-20 than planned in the original borrowing program for 2019-20? Has the NTG brought forward its borrowing program for 2020-21?

Question on Notice 1.7

Madam CHAIR: What economic modelling has occurred to demonstrate the impact of initiatives?

Question on Notice 1.8

Madam CHAIR: What are the estimated forgone revenue amounts?

Madam CHAIR: The time now being 4 pm, I declare this hearing closed.

I thank every one of you for attending.

The committee concluded.
